

SERMON - A Seismic Shift

Luke 9:28-36 (18-48)

Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist Bishop, often described as one of America's most influential preachers shares the story of the time he was preaching to a small United Methodist Church in Alaska when an earthquake hit in the middle of his worship service. *I was preaching in Alaska in a small congregation in Homer when, in the middle of my sermon, the earth began to shake, the light fixtures swayed, the glass rattled. It took me about three seconds to realize that I was in my first ever earthquake. I was unnerved to say the least. I gulped, stopped mid-sentence, grasped the edge of the pulpit, and prayed for it to end. Fortunately for my nerves, the tremor lasted only a couple of seconds. But I was thoroughly shaken. It's no small thing for the first time in your life to feel the earth move beneath your feet, the walls shake, and the church threaten to come unglued.*

Yet the earthquake was not as unnerving to me as the reaction of those Alaska Methodists to the earthquake. In my momentary terror I looked out at them and they just sat there unmoved, unruffled, and unperturbed. What for me was a near-death experience was for them just another day in Alaska! "Last time two of those light fixtures fell," laconically commented one of them. That was it. I'm sure this is a prejudiced comment of a flatlander who is unaccustomed to the heaving Alaskan terrain, but still, something just doesn't seem right about a congregation that's able to stay serene during an earthquake. When the earth heaves and the ground shifts beneath our feet, I want a church that's screaming and ducking under the pews!¹

In Luke's Gospel this morning, we join with Jesus, Peter, James, and John (along with Moses and Elijah) on top of a mountain when the earth began moving under the feet of the disciples, metaphorically speaking! In a seismic shifting moment in the landscape of faith, the disciples' lives were about to be completely transformed in this pivotal moment in time, only the disciples weren't screaming and ducking under the pews! In fact, Peter, in his spiritual blindness, rather excitedly proclaims that they ought to build three monuments to signify the event – one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus! In other words, the disciples completely misunderstood the significance of what was happening in front of their very eyes! The earth was moving beneath their feet and they were reacting as if it was some kind of Old Testament revival event playing out in front of them and they wanted to memorialize it in stone!

The Transfiguration of Jesus is **the pivotal moment** in the Gospel story where Jesus turns from his mission and ministry living and walking among the people of Galilee to the impending narrative of his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection as he turns his face towards Jerusalem and Golgotha on the way down the mountain. What this moment in time represents is **the paradigm shift** - *the Transfiguration* before their very eyes - from the *old way of Faith* as

¹ Willimon, William as quoted in The Forward of Jim Kitchen's *The Emerging Church*, 2003 p. vii

depicted by Moses, representing the Law and Elijah, representing the Prophets, to the *New Emerging Faith summed up in Jesus* that God wants for all of humanity. In-order-for all of humanity to understand and live-out life in a divine economy of Love, as Jesus himself described in the Sermon on the Plain earlier in Luke's Gospel as enlivened in his very being, walking and living among the people of Galilee! ***To be transfigured in our lives today!***

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

This is the summation of the Gospel, God's divine way of living! (Luke 6:27-31)

God is calling us, through the prophet Jesus, to live out our lives in a morality that literally inverts the common morality that folks live by today! Jesus, the new Moses and new Elijah, calls us to live by a Law written upon our hearts and a prophetic calling that empowers us to be the presence of God among our neighbors and the whole world!

But we must turn to history to examine how we, the Church, went forth transfigured with that commission upon our lives and ask ourselves honestly, how are we doing today? To ask - whatever became of this Jesus movement after Jesus' resurrection and Great Commission? It might be said that we did our best in the first several hundred years after the time of Christ – though we were despised by Rome, beaten and killed for our faith. Faith was largely underground – a secret hidden in the basements of believers who did great good in the name of Jesus, but it was subversive at best. Until the early part of the Fourth Century, during the reign of Emperor Constantine, when Christianity was *normalized* into the culture of society, such that if one were a Christian, you were also understood to be a Roman; and if a Roman, you were a Christian! ***In other words, the once Wild and Transfigured nature of our radical faith in Jesus was tamed and subdued to such an extent that one's faith became a normal part of one's everyday affairs, relegating a once Transfigured faith into the numb world of a "pre-Transfigured" monument-building-church, numb to the earth quaking under our feet when one should expect the church to be screaming and ducking under the pews! Have we forgotten the message of selfless love and succumbed to a world based on greed and consumption?*** Interestingly for us, that tame bland faith lasted until the middle of the 20th Century, when much of that Roman order of Institutional Christianity began to fray and splinter – when the role of the Church in the midst of that world began to be challenged – and the people began losing faith in the very institution that was supposed to be representing God's Wild and Transfigured love to the hurting world!

Oddly enough, if anything, during this whole time of Covid, has been, perhaps a great blessing to the Church. It has caused us to cry out and wonder how we will do church if no one is present! Covid has pushed us to reflect on what is truly meaningful in our faith and how we do "Church!" Covid has been like an earthquake under our feet, moving us off our center

and requiring us to react to it in order to find ourselves again in some kind of new stasis, some kind of new normal. We discovered that people are willing, even hungry to connect or reconnect with our congregation via Zoom, Facebook or YouTube! Which has been a good thing! And that it is just a beginning! We have really been in the middle of a seismic shift in how we do church and how we live out our faith for a good 75 years now! God is transfiguring our beloved church in front of our very eyes and we are being called to, once again, **wake up and listen to Jesus, God's beloved!** God is helping us to understand that being Church is about loving our neighbors, and honoring God's Creation, Standing up for Justice with all peoples, not just the privileged few. God is challenging our understanding of global politics and asking us - **aren't all people my people??** When we are confronted with the mass extinction of species, God is asking us – **what are you doing to stave off these losses to my world?**

The world around us, the culture we live in, is being transfigured right in front of our very eyes, the earth is shifting right beneath our feet, from the former way of life as we've known it, to a new way of living, where a new generation of people are calling upon us to live more generously and graciously - we are living in the midst of a **seismic shift**, and God is saying to us – **get out there and live the gospel life of humble love for the unlovable, righteous justice for the marginalized, radical resistance to the hatred, gently inviting those who want to return to the former ways of life to see the beauty of a new dawn, seeking freedoms for all, engaging in eco-activism for the restoration of created order, to become midwives giving birth to a new kind of church for a new emerging generation of peoples everywhere... and so on, and so much more!** It's all waiting for us to awaken from our weary, tired, sleep-deprived selves. As we come down from the mountain with Jesus, who transfigures us as we walk with him toward our Jerusalem.

**In those moments, we live-out the message of divine love
standing on the rock-solid shoulders of Jesus -
even as the earth shifts beneath our feet!
And with Dylan Thomas - *rage against the dying of the light!***

May it be so in your life today and all our lives every day!

Amen.

Rev. John C. Weatherhogg
Congregational Church of Dorset and East Rupert
Dorset, Vermont
February 27, 2022

PRAYER OF PASTORAL CARE

Feb 27, 2022 Transfiguration

Following the petition: To you, O Lord, we pray, our response is **Answer us with mercy.**

Almighty, all merciful God, lover of justice and giver of peace,
Hear our prayer: For your people Israel, for the church of Jesus Christ, and for all people of many persuasions who seek your face.
To you, O Lord, we pray. **Answer us with mercy.**

'God of plowshares, pruning hooks, and peace-making, translate these words' of the prophets into hope today in Ukraine that there may be 'an end to missile strikes and long-range artillery. We pray for those who flee the capital and those who shelter in place. We pray for troops already exhausted from their long watching. Teach us a new peacemaking, guiding the leaders of nations, and holding the many who live and die because of their decisions.'
To you, O Lord, we pray. **Answer us with mercy.**

O God, our creator, we pray for the earth that you have made, that is trembling for redemption and re-creation. Strengthen the hands and hearts of all who work against climate change in our day, that present and future generations work for the well-being of the entire human family and all creatures of land, air and sea. To you, O Lord, we pray. **Answer us with mercy.**

O God of justice, compassion and healing, we pray for those tormented by the demons of illness, addiction, and grief. Be with families and health-care workers who care for and foster safety for the afflicted. We pray for those encountering loneliness, often without communities of support. Encourage all who befriend and work with those facing challenges of mental health. In our stress, may we be still and to know that you are God. To you, O Lord, we pray. **Answer us with mercy.**

We bring before you those on this church's immediate needs list.

Let our lives and our world be transfigured by your glory and transformed By your love; in the name of Jesus Christ, your chosen one, our Lord. **Amen.**

OFFERING

We serve the Lord with freedom; we worship God with joy.

In freedom and in joy, let us present the offerings of our lives to the Lord.

*DOXOLOGY

*PRAYER

Use us, and our gifts, in your service, O God, to establish justice and peace, for the good of all your people and the glory of your eternal realm. **Amen**